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ABSTRACT

The study of marital strengths in enduring marriages is conceptually in its formative stage. Further exploratory research may help to focus more clearly on key concepts and their interrelationships. A study was conducted of 15 couples who had been married for between 35 and 48 years. The husbands' ages ranged from 55 to 70 and the wives' ages ranged from 54 to 67. Subjects were for the most part highly educated and had a high socioeconomic level. All couples had at least one child. Unstructured, in-depth interviews were conducted with each spouse separately. All subjects also completed the Marital Comparison Level Index. Data analysis suggests that the following characteristics were key elements of enduring marriages: intimacy, autonomy, commitment, congruence, religious faith, and communication. Supporting characteristics included time together, time alone, shared interests and activities, family orientation, support, mutuality, interdependence, caring, respect, trust, and positive regard. The results suggest a high degree of variability in such areas as intimacy, commitment, and adaptability. The variability in satisfaction over time suggests support for the curvilinearity of marital satisfaction. Many respondents indicated that they felt closer to each other as the demands of parenting and careers lessened, indicating that the relationship between length of marriage and satisfaction may not be solely an artifact of less satisfying marriages ending in divorce. (NB)

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A Qualitative Study of Marital Strengths in Enduring Marriages

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Statistics indicate that over one million marriages end in divorce annually (National Center for Health Statistics, 1990). These figures prompt questions as to why some marriages end in divorce whereas other marriages endure. However, much of the research on marriage is approached from a clinical perspective, deducing conclusions about high quality marriages from the study of troubled marriages or marriages that break up (Lauer & Lauer, 1986; Olson et al., 1983). Rather than focusing on dysfunctional couples, an alternative method of study would be to explore the marital strengths of couples in long-term marriages. Thus, the findings would be directly applicable to the population of interest, those couples who are able to successfully persevere through the stresses of marriage.

Research in the areas of marital strengths and enduring marriages has generated a variety of characteristics related to enhanced marital relationships, such as love, reciprocity, communication, understanding, religious orientation, patience, commitment, intimacy, shared responsibility, personal identity, persistence, hopefulness, flexible boundaries, and congruence (Fields, 1983; Goldberg et al., 1985; Lauer & Lauer, 1986; Sporakowski & Hughston, 1978; Weishaus & Field, 1988;) Although this list appears very broad and cumbersome, some variables are emerging as more salient than others. For example, a study by Lauer and Lauer (1986) identified four key concepts: friendship, commitment, consensus, and humor. In their critique of the literature on enduring marriages, Sporakowski and Axelson (1984) concluded that the following characteristics were common across studies: "endurance, tolerance, enjoyment, perseverance, fulfillment over the years" (p. 88), concepts very similar to those of Lauer and Lauer (1986). Other researchers are attempting to establish relationships among the various variables (Barnhill, 1979; Beavers, 1982; Olson & McCubbin, 1982; Schumm, 1985). It is evident that the area of marital strengths in enduring marriages is conceptually in its formative stage. Therefore, further exploratory study may help to focus more clearly on key concepts and their interrelationships.

Methodology

A qualitative approach to the study of enduring marriages is appropriate for the following reasons. A review of the literature indicated that research in the area of marital strengths in enduring marriages is limited. The studies that exist focus on variables which are related to marital satisfaction, but few suggest how these variables may be interrelated. Thus, our understanding of the process involved in marriages that endure is very limited. Whereas qualitative research enables the generation of substantive theory arising from the data, a qualitative approach is appropriate for areas in need of exploratory research.

Secondly, the study of a couple's marital relationship entails the exploration of very personal, intimate areas of their lives. No two couples will have experienced marriage in the same way. Indeed, it is quite likely that no two spouses experience their own marriage similarly. Therefore, it is essential that the subjects be allowed to express their own unique experiences in a manner that reveals the meaning of those experiences for the individuals, along with the concomitant emotions and motivations (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979). This phenomenological approach captures the process by which individuals interpret their own world, allowing for an understanding based upon the individual's unique perspective (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). The ability to facilitate this type of exploration is the "tour de force" of qualitative methodology (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979).

Sample

Although many studies of enduring marriages have included marriages of shorter duration, the findings of Weishaus and Field (1988) suggested that marriages which have endured into the latter stages may experience an upswing in marital quality. This conclusion suggests that some marriages of shorter duration which may be experiencing a low level of functioning may be at a higher level of functioning should they endure past the middle stages. Information from couples who have experienced such an upswing in marital quality would be valuable to research in this area. Therefore, the population of interest in this study consisted of couples who had been married for 30 years or more.

A purposive sample of 15 couples was generated through referrals by faculty, staff, and students in the Department of Child and Family Studies of a southeastern university as well as other community contacts. One couple was referred by another couple in the sample.

These couples had been married between 35 and 48 years, with a mean of 40.4 years. The husbands' age ranged from 55 to 70, with a mean age of 63.5. The mean age for wives was 61.7, with a range of 54 to 67 years.

For the most part, they were a highly educated sample. All had graduated from high school, and two wives had attended a vocational college. Three husbands and four wives had attended college without receiving a degree. Five husbands and six wives had culminated their college education with a bachelor degree, and four husbands and one wife had received advanced degrees.

The socioeconomic level of this group was also high. All families had an income of at least $15,000, and 11 families had an income of at least $35,000. One couple declined to reveal their income.

Many of the couples were recommended by a fellow church member, and the other couples also were affiliated to some degree with a church. Therefore, all couples were somewhat religiously oriented. However, the community from which this sample was drawn has a high degree of religious orientation so that this characteristic may not be far from representative for this community. Ten couples were Protestant, one couple was Catholic, and one couple was non-denominational. Three marriages were mixed.

All couples had at least one child. Only one couple still had a child, who is an adult, living at home. None of the families had grandchildren living with them.

Instruments

Interviews. Unstructured, in-depth interviews were conducted with each spouse separately. The couples were interviewed separately so that each individual could freely discuss his or her ideas about the marriage with a guarantee of confidentiality. Also, whereas the investigator has not been trained as a marriage therapist, it was deemed advisable to avoid the potential for exacerbating pre-existing marital tension. The individuals were asked to share their perceptions of their strengths of the relationship as well as their spouse's and their own individual strengths. They also were asked to talk about the times in which they felt close to the spouse as well as times that were difficult. Finally, the subjects were asked what they felt were the most important things to know about marriage. As an individual began talking about a significant area in their relationship, probing questions were used to explore the area in greater depth.

The Marital Comparison Level Index. In order to verify the self-reports of marital satisfaction, the Marital Comparison Level Index (Sabatelli, 1984) was administered to each individual following the interviews. This measure also was used as a means of validating the interviewer's subjective impression of the marriage. The MCLI is a unidimensional measure consisting of 32 items which explore the fit between the spouses' actual relationship and their realistic, as opposed to ideal, expectations of marriage (Sabatelli, 1988).

The underlying assumption of this measure is that the failure to meet expectations results in fewer rewards from the relationship and more complaints (Sabatelli, 1984). The instrument was administered after the interview in order to avoid biasing the interviews. Two couples declined to fill out the instrument.

Group means and standard deviations for husbands, wives, and the total sample were calculated (see Table 1). Whereas the husbands' mean score was lower than that of the wives, the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test was calculated in order

to determine whether this difference was significant. The Wilcoxon is a non-parametric test for related two-sample cases at the ordinal level (Siegel, 1956). The t value of 32 indicated that the difference between husbands' and wives' mean scores was not significant at the .05 level. This result suggests that, as a group, the husbands and wives had similar perceptions of the congruence between their expectations and their experiences in marriages.

Although the majority of individuals were within one standard deviation of the mean, a few were more than one standard deviation below the mean. This finding suggests that these individuals may not perceive their marriages as being as rewarding as the rest of the subjects. The researcher had anticipated that this would be the case for one of the individuals. However, the other two individuals were not expected to fall into this category. One of them, a husband, was not below a standard deviation for the men's subsample, indicating that he does not deviate greatly from the husbands. The other individual, a wife, indicated on her questionnaire that she had expected her relationship to be very rewarding and that she had not been disappointed. Therefore, she answered all questions at the midpoint.

However, the couples generally tended to have marriages in which they felt their expectations had been fulfilled. Thus, it appears that they are satisfied in their marriages.

Procedures

Referred couples were contacted by telephone to determine whether both spouses would be interested in participating in the study. Of the 23 couples contacted, six couples refused to be in the study and one couple was not able to schedule an interview.

The interviews averaged one hour in length and were tape-recorded. They then were transcribed and coded by the interviewer. In order to establish reliability in coding, the first interview was coded by a second coder also. A ratio of disagreements to agreements was calculated, resulting in intercoder reliability of .95.

Coding was aided by the use of Ethnograph, a computer program which stores the researcher's codes. This program allowed the researcher to retrieve all references to a specific code across all subjects. Thus, the program served to organize the data.

TABLE 1

Husbands' and Wives' Perceptions of Congruence between Their Expectations of Marriage and Their Experiences of Marriage

Group'	M	SD	t
Husbands	172.846	33.503	
Wives	182.846	22.423	
Total	177.846	28,393	32

'n = 13 for each group.

After the coding for each couple was completed, an analytic memo was composed for each individual and for the couple, for a total of three memos per couple. These memos summarized the salient issues raised by each spouse and incorporated the interviewer's impressions. The couple memo synthesized the spouses perceptions as well as those of the interviewer, facilitating data analysis.

Data Analysis

The coding process entailed reviewing the transcripts of the interviews for passages dealing with marital characteristics and strengths. Similarities among these concepts began to emerge, suggesting categories into which the concepts were grouped. As analysis proceeded, suggested relationships among the various concepts and categories began to evolve.

Results

The analysis of these data suggested that the following characteristics were key elements of enduring marriages: intimacy, autonomy, commitment, congruence, religious faith, and communication. Supporting characteristics included time together, time alone, shared interests and activities, family orientation, support, mutuality, interdependence, caring, respect, trust, and positive regard. These key elements have been identified in the marital strengths literature.

This study particularly supported the key concepts identified by Lauer and Lauer (1986) and Sporakowski and Axelson (1984). Points of consensus in these three studies included the salience of intimacy, friendship, and enjoyment as well as the importance of commitment, tolerance, and perseverance.

The long-term marriages of this sample appeared to be characterized by commitment to marriage as well as commitment to the spouse as a person. The commitment to the spouse was evidenced in the friendship and intimacy shared by most of the couples. However, the commitment and intimacy of these couples varied both qualitatively and temporally. Also, intimacy was balanced in most cases by the autonomy of the spouses.

Congruent perceptions of the relationship appeared to be related to the level of intimacy. For a few couples, there seemed to be a sense of resignation on the part of one spouse who perceived the level of intimacy as less than desirable. The other spouse appeared to be oblivious to the degree of frustration the resigned spouse experienced. Most of the incongruent couples were unable to resolve this situation. However, one resigned spouse dealt positively with the lack of intimacy in their relationship by channeling her needs into her work. This arrangement appears to have succeeded for them because they both have a strong work ethic.

Most of the couples indicated that their relationship was strengthened through communication. Information concerning communication was primarily self-report. However, some brief interactions among couples were observed, and impressions were developed further from anecdotes. It became evident that the quality of communication was inconsistent across couples, with more effective communication being found in couples with higher levels of intimacy.

Although religious orientation was highly valued by this sample, its contribution to these couples varied. It may be that religious orientation is a multidimensional construct comprised of moral guidance, as well as social, emotional, and spiritual support.

Possible interrelationships among the concepts were identified, and a model depicting these hypothesized interrelationships has been suggested for further empirical investigation (see Figure 1). By definition, commitment is a prerequisite to an enduring marriage. Commitment was related to another key component, intimacy. It appeared that intimacy was a central concept related to all the other key elements. Intimacy is some amount of connectedness to one's mate, although the degree of connectedness varies widely. However, intimacy needs to be tempered with autonomy in order to avoid dysfunctional enmeshment. Intimacy fosters communication, which in turn enhances intimacy. Communication and commitment also appeared to be reciprocally related. Religious orientation influenced commitment as well as intimacy. Although religious orientation may have a positive effect upon communication, a moralistic posture may stifle communication.

One's satisfaction in marriage is also influenced by congruent expectations of intimacy. Typically, the resigned spouse in an incongruent marriage did not reveal the depths of his or her frustration to the partner. Thus, the relationship was predominated by unresolved tension for at least one of the partners. It appears that couples who are more loosely connected may turn to other sources of fulfillment, such as career or family. However, their satisfaction with this arrangement will depend upon their congruent expectations. A spouse who truly desires intimacy with a mate who channels his or her efforts into other areas may not be fulfilled by a less intimate arrangement.

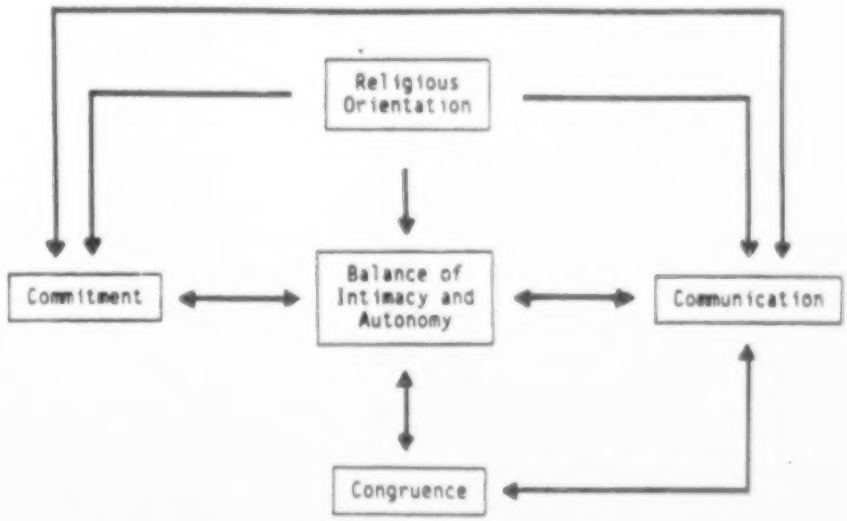

Figure 1. A hypothesized model of interrelationships among characteristics of enduring marriages.

Implications

This study served to underscore the need for more research in the area of enduring marriages in order to develop a deeper understanding of the process involved in marital stability. As researchers and educators, we have tended to glamorize marriage, presenting a picture of the ideal as the standard toward which all couples should strive when, in reality, most marriages are far from ideal. The results of this study suggest a high degree of variability in such areas as intimacy, commitment, and adaptability.

The example of the wife who adapted to the lack of intimacy in her marriage by finding fulfillment through her work raises an interesting question regarding the desirability of rechanneling unmet intimacy needs. It appeared that this woman coped by seeking fulfillment in her work and art, or what Marks (1986, 1989) would call her third corner. Swensen et al. (1984) posited that the interaction among ego strength, commitment, and active coping results in vitality and intimacy within the marital relationship. However, the increased vitality resulting in this case was more personal than relational. Although the wife stated that she never regretted staying in the marriage, the dynamics of the relationship did not change drastically. Thus, this marriage could still be classified as loosely connected or passive/congenial. Although this marriage appeared to be leaning more towards autonomy than intimacy, the partners seemed to be satisfied and fulfilled. This example suggests that some couples may be able to adapt to lower levels of marital intimacy and still be functional.

According to Marks (1989), "There is a broad range of middle ground between the fluid evenhandedness of balanced connection and some form of fusion, and this is the territory we need to explore" (p. 21). Although some family researchers might consider an intrinsic marriage to be the ideal, it behooves us to consider less-than-ideal arrangements as viable alternatives. Thus, future research needs to focus on the variability of functioning and quality in utilitarian, as well as intrinsic, marriage types.

The variability in satisfaction over time suggested support for the curvilinearity of marital satisfaction. Many of these couples indicated that they felt closer to one another as the demands of parenting and career began to abate, indicating that the relationship between length of marriage and satisfaction may not be solely an artifact of less satisfying marriages ending in divorce.

Most of the couples referred to the value of religious orientation in their marriages. However, due to the probable bias toward religion of this sample and that of other studies (Olson et al., 1983; Schumm, 1985), the question of the salience of religious orientation needs to be considered further. This

area of research would benefit from studies in which the religious orientation of the sample is more representative of the population of couples in enduring marriages.

Also, the possible multidimensionality of religious orientation is another aspect worthy of consideration. Although couples agreed on the importance of religious orientation, many of them considered it salient for different reasons. It might be of interest to further explore the unique relationships of social support, emotional support, spiritual support, and moral guidance to marriage.

As Schumm (1985) suggested, the area of marital strengths in enduring marriages is primed for theory development. The current study has reinforced some of the previous work in this area and has attempted to suggest directions for further research. Research should progress now toward establishing linkages between marital strengths.

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